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Summer reading 2009/10
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Australian fiction is booming, in quantity as well as quality. 2009 has produced so many fine novels it's hard to know where to start with recommendations for summer reading. There is David Sornig's *Spiel* (UNSW Press), a stylish, enigmatic novel of present-day Berlin, reaching back to the sinister murk of the pre-1989 East German regime; or if you prefer your communists Russian, Andrew Croome's *Document Z* (Allen & Unwin) is a clever and perceptive historical novel about the Petrov Affair, seen through the eyes of the main participants, Evdokia and Vladimir Petrov and Michael Bialoguski, the Australian double agent.

Of two enjoyable novels about former rock stars, Nick Earls' *The True Story of Butterfish* (Vintage) is perhaps the more light-weight but nevertheless worth reading for the vivid portrayal of its teenage characters, while Steven Lang's *88 Lines about 44 Women* (Penguin Viking) – not as blatantly sexist as the title implies – contains a stinging critique of Anglo-Saxon masculinity and its tragic potential. Sonia Orchard has chosen to write about the brief mid-century career of Australian classical pianist Noël Mewton-Wood, but instead of producing a biography or historical fiction, in her impressive debut novel *Virtuoso* (Fourth Estate) she has created a younger, lesser musician, torn between adoration and envy for Mewton-Wood.

Peter Carey's *Parrot and Olivier in America* represents a return to form after the disappointment of *His Illegal Self*. It's a big book on a large scale, weaving together the lives of an orphaned English print-maker and a French aristocrat (based on Alexis de Tocqueville) as they explore the New World. Their two voices are poised in delicious counterpoint, the prose a delight. Eva Hornung (formerly Sallis) astonishes once again with *Dogboy* (Text), as she questions just about everything about what it means to be human through the story of a small boy abandoned by his relatives and taken in by a family of dogs.

Emily Maguire contributes *Smoke in the Room* (Picador), an edgy, brilliant and disturbing novel about three lost souls, all absorbed with their own troubles, thrown together in a Sydney flat. Katie is an unlikely but immensely appealing heroine, with her blatant disregard of social niceties and intellectual pretensions. A less appealing protagonist is M.J. Hyland's Patrick Oxtoby in *This is How* (Text), but as an anatomisation of the disturbed mind this novel is unsurpassed. Hyland writes so simply, in the first person and the present tense, that the power and control of her prose is astonishing. Adelaide writer Tracy Crisp has also taken up a serious issue in *Black Dust Dancing* (Wakefield), set in a town like Pirie with a heroine fighting for her child's health against the entrenched interests and attitudes of an industrial town. Despite its clear moral stance it's subtle and economical. Charlotte Wood's anthology *Brothers and Sisters* (Allen & Unwin) is a hybrid of fiction and memoir, with twelve contributions from some of Australia's leading writers, including Christos Tsiolkas, Robert Drewe and Paddy O'Reilly. Particularly striking are Nam Le's unsettling story 'The Yarra', and Virginia Peters' creepy 'About the Others'.

In memoirs, Anna Goldsworthy's *Piano Lessons* (Black Inc) is a deeply felt, moving and fascinating exploration of two lives dedicated to music, her own and that of her

teacher Eleonora Sivan. J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (Knopf) is hardly a memoir, though its protagonist shares a name and some biographical data with its author. Its summery name belies a grim and self-lacerating examination of the life of an ineffectual liberal in the South Africa of the early 1970s. Also worth noting is the new edition of Nicolas Rothwell's wonderful outback odyssey *Wings of the Kite-Hawk: A Journey into the Heart of Australia* (Black Inc), first published in 2003.

If you're looking for humour, you can't go past Catherine Deveney's *Free to a Good Home* (Black Inc), a selection of her always passionate and usually hilarious topical rants in the *Age* from the past year. Michael McGirr's gently humorous and informative *The Lost Art of Sleep* is a mixture of memoir, history, and the latest medical research about a subject close to everyone's heart, prompted by the onset of fatherhood.

Wakefield has brought out two sturdy political studies in time for Christmas. *State of South Australia: From Crisis to Prosperity?* edited by John Spoehr is a summary from experts in nineteen fields, including economics, education, environment, the arts, law and order, and the media. Full of facts and hard-headed analysis, it's a good reference as well as an interesting read. And UniSA Hawke Institute scholars Gerry Bloustien, Barbara Comber and Alison Mackinnon have brought together former members of the Hawke government and academics to produce *The Hawke Legacy*. And no survey of the year's non-fiction would be complete without mentioning *Quarterly Essay*, including this year Annabel Crabbe's timely, evenhanded and ever so slightly disturbing dissection of Malcolm Turnbull, *Stop at Nothing*, Noel Pearson's fiercely intelligent *Radical Hope: Education and Equality in Australia*, about the theory and practice of Aboriginal education, and in December the inimitable Mungo McCallum's *Australian Story: Kevin Rudd and the Lucky Country*.